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ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Written statement submitted by the Baha'i International Community,
a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[4 January 2000]

GE.00-10312 (E)

The right to education

1. The right to education is, in the view of the Baha'i International Community, one of the most important rights set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. So important is the right to education that it is elaborated in both the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Indeed, the very mission of the founders of the great religions throughout history has been to educate humankind. Education is critical to the development of each individual's potential and to his or her enjoyment of the full range of human rights. At the same time, education must serve society as a whole by instilling in individuals an unwavering respect for the rights of others and a desire to uphold and defend those rights.

2. The Baha'i International Community is, therefore, pleased that in 1998 the Commission on Human Rights accepted the recommendation of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights to appoint a special rapporteur whose mandate "will focus on the right to education".[1] We are also pleased that the Special Rapporteur's mandate addresses implementation "of the principle of compulsory primary education free of charge for all"[2] and that it takes into account "the situation and needs of the girl child".[3]

3. While we agree that access to education is a matter that must be given serious attention by Governments and non-governmental organizations alike, we feel that the content of education is of primary importance. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that the goal of education is not only "the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity" but also the promotion of "understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial, ethnic or religious groups ..."[4] To accomplish these broad and lofty goals, education must address the whole person, that is, it should seek to develop the full range of human capacities – intellectual, social, physical and spiritual.

4. In the minds of many, the aim of education is limited to empowering the person to achieve material well-being and prosperity, with little regard for his or her responsibility towards others and humanity as a whole. Such a materialistic approach to education will continue to exacerbate the disparity between the wealthy few and the impoverished many – perpetuating the injustices of social stratification and contributing to the increasing instability in the world. If, however, material education goes hand in hand with spiritual education and moral development, it will be the means for ensuring the well-being and prosperity of humanity as a whole. Instead of emphasizing competition, education would do well, at this point in history, to foster the attitudes and skills necessary for cooperation; for the very survival of humankind now depends on our ability to cooperate and on our collective commitment to justice and human rights for all. The ability to cooperate with others will also ensure that increasing numbers of people will benefit from the right to education.

5. The recent conflicts in Europe demonstrate the failure of material education alone to foster respect for human rights. The Baha'i faith, as a matter of principle, accords priority to spiritual and moral education over the other aspects of education. "Good behaviour and high moral character must come first", say the Baha'i Writings, "for unless the character be trained, acquiring knowledge will only prove injurious. Knowledge is praiseworthy when it is coupled with ethical conduct and a virtuous character, otherwise it is a deadly poison, a frightful

danger".[5] The function of moral and spiritual education is to guide the use of human capacities for the good of all. We submit, therefore, that the goal of education should be not only the acquisition of knowledge, but also the acquisition of spiritual qualities such as compassion, trustworthiness, service, justice, and respect for all.

6. At the heart of the report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Learning: The Treasure Within,[6] is the notion put forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child that education should enable the individual to develop fully his or her potentialities.[7] "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value". Bahá'u'lláh urges, "Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom".[8] These treasures must be consciously developed, drawn out and cultivated because although the capacity for good is innate, human beings can fall prey to equally innate corrupt inclinations. "Man is even as steel", states Bahá'u'lláh, "the essence of which is hidden: through admonition and explanation, good counsel and education, that essence will be brought to light. If, however, he be allowed to remain in his original condition, the corrosion of lusts and appetites will effectively destroy him".[9]

7. Because every child stands in need of education, particularly in moral values, it is essential that education be provided for girl children, who will be the mothers and first educators of succeeding generations. Educating mothers is the most efficient way of ensuring that the benefits of education are diffused into society as a whole. Providing women and girls equal access to education will also make possible their full participation in society, which Baha'is believe will be the catalyst for the creation of a just society and the establishment of lasting peace in the world. We, therefore, endorse the resolution's recommendation that the Special Rapporteur "promote the elimination of all forms of discrimination in education".[10]

8. In considering the content of education, it is important to remember that the prejudices separating the peoples of the world and, at times, erupting into conflicts and wars are not just the result of ignorance but are sometimes the product of a biased education. The development of and adherence to a universal set of educational principles, based, perhaps, on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, could provide a unifying framework within which to cultivate an understanding of the diversity of human experience. The strength of such a framework will derive from its basis in the principle of the oneness of humanity. Acceptance of that one principle will make possible the cultivation of unity among the diverse elements of the human family, recognizing common human aspirations in the varied cultures, habits, and temperaments that exist in every country and throughout the world. The oneness of humanity and the universality of human rights should be taught in every classroom in the world, along with skills in consultation and conflict resolution.

9. Education should be universal, compulsory and free of charge. We acknowledge that such a goal can be accomplished only when the responsibility is shared. "Everyone, whether man or woman, should", according to Baha'i scripture, "hand over ... a portion of what he or she earneth through trade, agriculture or other occupation, for the training and education of children".[11] We commend the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Ms. Katarina Tomasevski, for having included "Financial obstacles impeding access to primary school" as part of her preliminary report.[12]

10. Even where Governments provide educational services, some groups still encounter obstacles. The experience of the United Nations agencies and the Member States in the fields of literacy and public health has shown that certain segments of the population in various countries remain unable to benefit from such public services owing to political, cultural, ethnic, language or geographical situations. We, therefore, submit that special provision be stipulated for the protection of the right of education for such deprived groups. We look forward to the Special Rapporteur's planned collection and analysis of "the existing quantitative and qualitative information on the pattern of the lack of access to education in order to map out obstacles to the realization of the right to education".[13]

11. Finally, while we agree that priority should be given to universal compulsory education in childhood, we also believe that everyone benefits when education becomes a life-long process. UNESCO states that education should instil a thirst and a desire for knowledge,[14] and we would add that it should also foster a desire for excellence. Such aspirations acquired in childhood, coupled with life-long possibilities for furthering education, are the bases for an ever-advancing civilization.

12. The Baha'i International Community will continue its efforts to support education that develops individual capacity and instils respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of every person. In this regard, it is pleased to pledge its full support and cooperation to the Commission's Special Rapporteur for the preservation and universal implementation of the right to education.

Notes

[1] Commission on Human Rights resolution 1998/33, para. 6 (a).

[2] Ibid. para. 6 (a) (ii).

[3] Ibid. para. 6 (a) (iii).

[4] Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

[5] Baha'i Education, a compilation of extracts from the Baha'i Writings, London, Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1987, p. 29, para. 74

[6] See the report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first century: "Learning: The Treasure Within".

[7] See the Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 29 (a).

[8] Gleanings of the Writings of Bahá-u-lláh, CXXII, pp. 259-60.

[9] Baha'i Education, p. 3, para. 10.

[10] Commission on Human Rights resolution 1998/33, para. 6 (a) (iii).

[11] Tablets of Bahá-u-lláh, p. 90.

[12] E/CN.4/1999/49, para. 32-41.

[13] Ibid., para. 59.

[14] Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first century. One of the four pillars of education is "learning to know".

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